THE HELP
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Psalm 8
Luke 16:1–13
Philemon 1:1–21

"No longer as a slave but more than a slave,
a beloved brother."
Philemon 1:16 (NRSV)

Making a good living
is not only about earning income.
When understood in moral and theological terms,
it is the practice of using one's economic values,
choices, and behaviors to shape a life
focused on those goods that really do matter. . . .
It calls us to engage in economic life critically,
thoughtfully, and prayerfully by making choices
that allow us both to develop our own capabilities
and to further justice, peace, and well-being in God's world.

Douglas A. Hicks
"Making a Good Living"
in *On Our Way:*
Christian Practices for Living a Whole Life

Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts
and minds to your life-changing and world-changing word.
Give us emotions and intellects big enough, open enough
to hear a new word and spirits big enough to trust that word
and you with our daily lives: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Kathryn Stockett's best-selling novel, *The Help,* is about the African American housekeepers, the maids, in the community of her childhood, Jackson, Mississippi, in the 1960s. *The Help* is actually a book about a book. Skeeter, a recent Ole Miss graduate from a well-to-do and well-connected old family, an aspiring journalist, decides to write a book about the life of the maids and housekeepers who serve the people of Jackson. Her plan is to conduct interviews and ask them about their lives and work and then write the book.

Kathryn Stockett remembers her own childhood and the remarkable woman who worked in her home, Demetrie.

> She would stand me in front of the mirror and say, “You are beautiful. You a beautiful girl” when clearly I was not. I wore glasses and had stringy brown hair. I had a stubborn aversion to the bathtub. My mother was out of town a lot and [my sister and brother] were tired of me hanging around and I felt left over. Demetrie knew it and took my hand and told me I was fine. (p. 448)

The fictional Skeeter convinces two maids, Abilene and Minnie, to help her by recruiting other housekeepers to be interviewed for her book. Abilene works for the Leefolts. Ms. Leefolt doesn’t pay much attention to her children; Abilene does.

> Taking care of white babies, that’s what I do, along with all the cooking and cleaning I done raised seventeen kids in my lifetime. I know how to get them babies to sleep, stop crying, and go in the toilet bowl before they mamas get out a bed in the morning. (p. 1)

Minnie is Skeeter’s second partner: heavy set, full of opinions and unafraid to express them, which gets her in trouble. She is also the best cook in the city, and everyone knows it, so in spite of her sassiness she enjoys job security.

The maids are simply not regarded as human beings; they are “the help.” When Abilene serves a luncheon for her employer’s card club, the table talk turns to a local initiative to have every family construct a second bathroom, outside if necessary, for the help—the black housekeepers and maids—to prevent them from using the family’s facilities for reasons of cleanliness and hygiene. As she serves the women their lunch and iced tea, Abilene hears it all. They talk as if she isn’t even there, which in a way she isn’t.

Kathryn Stockett writes, “Generations of African American women saw their gifts unacknowledged, saw their humanity ignored. . . . I don’t presume to think that I know what it really felt like to be a black woman in Mississippi in the 60s. I don’t think it is something any white woman on the other end of a black woman’s paycheck could ever truly understand. But trying to understand is vital to our humanity.”

“One line in *The Help* I truly treasure,” Kathryn Stockton says. Near the end of the book, Skeeter, after a late-night conversation in Abiline’s kitchen, reflects, “Wasn’t that the point of the book? For women to realize we are just two people, not that much separates us. Not nearly as much as I thought.”

Two thousand years ago the writer of a remarkable letter referred to the help in these words: “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother.”

St. Paul’s letter to a man by the name of Philemon is a remarkable document, written around the year 55 or 60. It is brief, just five paragraphs. Paul is in prison, either in Ephesus or Rome, and he is writing to a dear friend in the city of Colossae. Philemon is a man of wealth and standing in the community. His home is large, apparently: the new Christian church in Colossae gathers in it weekly for worship and a meal, and he owns slaves, one of whom, Onesimus, has run away and found his way to Paul, in prison. Onesimus is being useful to Paul. I like to think that, like Abiline in *The Help,* Onesimus was serving meals in Philemon’s household and overheard conversations about this new movement, this new gospel and the love of God. Maybe Onesimus actually helped with the bread and wine they ate and drank to remember Jesus. But on the way out, Onesimus also steals money from his owner.

Now Paul is sending him back with this little letter, asking Philemon to receive Onesimus not as a slave, but as a free man, a beloved brother, and promising to repay Philemon for whatever Onesimus stole from him.

It’s a remarkable little document. Paul compliments Philemon on his faith and generosity in terms of respect and affection. They are obviously very good friends. Paul doesn’t demand but appeals to Philemon’s better nature to accept Onesimus back into his household, now as a free man, a beloved brother.

Sometimes we wonder why the New Testament, particularly Paul, does not directly challenge the institution of slavery. Part of the answer, I suppose, is that slavery was simply part of the economic and social structure of that world, without which life was simply unimaginable. It has been estimated that one out of four people in the Roman Empire were slaves, maybe more. For thousands of years, prisoners of war became the victor’s slaves. People who could not otherwise feed and house themselves and their families sold themselves voluntarily into servitude. Life without slavery was, someone observed, simply not on anyone’s radar screen yet.

I think Paul *was* confronting the institution of slavery by undercutting its very foundation. He may not even have realized himself the radical, revolutionary idea that a slave was not a slave in his or her essence, not a less-than-human commodity to be bought, used, and sold, but a human being, a beloved brother or sister.

It is still one of the most revolutionary ideas in the history of the world: each individual human being is a child of God, given dignity and value by God, to be honored and respected. When a person knows that about himself or herself, nothing can ultimately defeat or destroy that God-given, God-honored self.

It is the theme of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech on August 28, 1963, in front of the Lincoln Memorial, a speech that was the high point of the American civil rights movement and of the larger movement in human history to honor and respect every human being. I think it was one of the great moments in American history.

Standing in front of the statue of Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr. said to militants who were urging violence, "In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred."

"When will you be satisfied?" King said he was frequently asked. "We will never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped and robbed of their dignity by signs stating 'For Whites Only.'"

"I have a dream," Martin Luther King Jr. said, "that one day little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers."

In the superb motion picture *Invictus,* Nelson Mandela, newly elected President of South Africa after the dismantling of apartheid—which regarded South African blacks as less than full human beings—has to explain to his own supporters that the way forward is not to demonize the white people who oppressed them and held them down but to show honor and respect. Even the nation's rugby team—all white but one—will remain as it is and become the pride of the entire nation. Mandela will go down in history, I believe, along with Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., as one of the truly remarkable and great social and political leaders of our time for effecting enormous social change by confronting evil—deep-seated evil—built onto the political and social structure of society, by doing so not violently but nonviolently, not by exacting revenge, not by retaliating and treating former oppressors as he and others had been treated, but by remembering—difficult as it is—that every man and woman is entitled to respect, dignity, and love and that to turn to violence and revenge is to reduce the size of one's own soul, to become, oneself, less than human.

Invictus is the title of a poem (written in 1875) by William Ernest Henley that Mandella used to explain to his critics, doubters, and people who

wanted him to exact revenge. He repeated it to himself every day of the twenty-seven years he was held in a South African prison.

> Out of the night that covers me,
> Black as the pit from pole to pole,
> I thank whatever gods may be
> For my unconquerable soul.
>
> In the fell clutch of circumstance
> I have not winced nor cried aloud.
> Under the bludgeonings of chance
> My head is bloody, but unbowed.
>
> Beyond this place of wrath and tears
> Looms but the horror of the shade,
> And yet the menace of the years
> Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.
>
> It matters not how strait the gait,
> How charged with punishments the scroll.
> I am the master of my fate;
> I am the captain of my soul.

At its best, the labor movement was based on and expressed the evolving idea, with its roots in the Bible, that human beings are human, not commodities, created in the image of God: management and labor, executive and worker—each has dignity, value, and rights. I grew up with a father who was an anomaly, a contradiction in terms—actually quite common among Western Pennsylvania blue-collar employees of the Pennsylvania Rail Road. He was a rock-ribbed Republican: loved Richard Nixon; detested Franklin D. Roosevelt; used to claim that the first words I ever said clearly were “Wendell Wilkie,” the Republican presidential candidate in 1940; and never recovered from the fact that his first child was born on FDR’s birthday. And he was also a rock-ribbed member of the Brotherhood of Rail Road Trainmen, his union, which he knew was an absolutely necessary voice and force in an industry not known for its humane treatment of its employees and which, he explained to me later when I was old enough to ask him, never seemed to miss an opportunity to demean its own employees and never granted a cost of living raise or a benefit without being forced to by the threat of a strikeand which regularly laid them off, furloughed them during slow times—perhaps an economic necessity, but also a human tragedy with strong, hard-working men unable to provide for their families.

So today make a point of acknowledging, saying a prayer of gratitude for, and if possible, personally thanking those upon whose work the life of our

community and our personal life depend; those whose work makes our life safer, cleaner, more comfortable, more beautiful.

the cop on the corner
the traffic director in the intersection
the ambulance driver
the firefighter
the bus driver
the sanitation worker
the farm workers who plant and pick our vegetables and fruit
the clerk at the supermarket
the locker room attendant
the plumber, carpenter, painter, concrete finisher
the truck driver, Metra engineer, cabbie
the ER nurse, social worker
the school teacher—the public school teacher, particularly, my heroes and heroines who go into the toughest neighborhoods in this city, to teach, nurture, care for and sometimes feed, clothe, and buy school supplies for our smallest, weakest, most vulnerable

Start right here with house staff, who mop, vacuum, polish, and clean up after us. The administrative assistants who type, telephone, print.

Nancy Ortberg, a Presbyterian minister at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, preached a sermon on work that caught the attention of the publisher of *Forbes* magazine, who cited it in an editorial.

Ortberg told how Max DePree, former CEO of Herman Miller, and an intentional Christian, used to have his management team every week, on Wednesday, “bring a brown bag lunch and go down to the factory floor, where the furniture was being made, to eat. They were to sit for an hour and listen, get to know the names of the workers, their challenges, concerns, and ideas.”

Nancy Ortberg was an emergency room nurse before becoming a minister and remembered a night at the end of her shift, when she was preparing to go home. The ER was a mess. The ER physician was debriefing a resident about procedures and protocols, complimenting the young resident on his competence.

And then he put his hand on the resident’s arm and asked, “When you finished did you notice the young man from housekeeping who came in to clean the room?” There was a blank look on the young doctor’s face.

“His name is Carlos. He’s been here for three years. He does a fabulous job. When he comes in he gets the room turned around so fast that you and I can

get our next patients in quickly. His wife's name is Maria. They have four children." Then he named each child and their ages.

"He lives in a rented house three blocks from here. They've been up from Mexico for about five years. His name is Carlos. Next week I would like you to tell me something about Carlos that I don't already know. Okay? Now let's go check on the rest of the patients" (Forbes, 23 April 2007).

"Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while," Paul wrote to Philemon, "so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother"—a beloved brother who, like you and me, was created in the image of God and for whom Jesus Christ lived and died.

Amen.